

## MEDIA AWARENESS NETWORK

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### Logical Fallacies

A Logical Fallacy is an argument that *sounds* logical, but, in reality, the premises given for the conclusion do not provide proper support for the argument. An example: birds fly in the sky; airplanes fly in the sky; therefore, airplanes are birds.

In addition to other propaganda techniques, logical fallacies are often used by those who seek to convince or misinform – including hate-mongers. Here are some of the logical fallacies you are likely to see in propaganda campaigns.

#### Fallacies of Causality

##### Post Hoc Ergo Propter Hoc\*

\*or, for those of you who aren't up on your Latin, "after the fact therefore because of the fact"

The "post hoc" fallacy consists of attributing a cause and effect relationship (Y was caused by X) based on the fact that Y came after X. This fallacy is committed whenever someone claims or implies an event which occurred *after* another event must have been *caused* by it.

Studies have conclusively proven that 83 per cent of people who have died in automobile accidents last year ate ice cream within a month of their accidents. This figure strongly suggests that eating ice cream causes automobile accidents.

##### Third Cause

The "third-cause" fallacy is a variation on the *post hoc* fallacy in which it is claimed that X causes Y when it can be demonstrated that *both* X and Y are caused by Z. When third causes are ignored, it's often possible to marshal very impressive statistical evidence in support of a non-existent causality.

Every year, when the asphalt starts to get sticky, people die of heat stroke. It seems that heat stroke is a disease caused by the fumes emitted by sticky asphalt. (*Both heat stroke and sticky asphalt are both caused by heat.*)

#### Fallacies that Assume the Conclusion

##### Alleged Certainty

The fallacy of "alleged certainty" is the most basic of all fallacies: the arguer assumes that the point he or she is trying to prove is correct in the first place. Generally, those employing this fallacy begin with a statement such as "everyone knows that. . . ." or "it is universally acknowledged that. . . ." Be careful, though – some things really *are* true. For example, almost every adult Canadian knows (or should know) that Ottawa is the capital of Canada, so it would not be a mistake to automatically accept this fact as certain. To qualify as an "alleged certainty," something that still needs to be proven must be asserted as true.

"It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife." (*Jane Austen wrote this in her novel Pride and Prejudice and yes, Jane knew that it was a fallacy – that was the point.*)

## Complex Question

A "complex question" is a fallacy that combines two unrelated – or tenuously related – questions into a query that requires a single answer.

*(Politician to voters) "Are you willing to elect my opponent and risk total bankruptcy of the social security and Medicare programs within five years?"*

## Fallacies that Change the Subject

### Ad Hominem

"*Ad hominem*" is a Latin phrase meaning "against the man."

This fallacy should not be confused with a legitimate challenge to authority. When someone makes a claim based on their own authority, it's perfectly logical to call that authority into question. The "ad hominem" fallacy comes into play when that person's argument or viewpoint is discounted because of character flaws that have nothing to do with the arguments at issue.

*How can people believe the theory of evolution when it is a well-known fact that Darwin cheated on his wife?*

### Appeal to Authority

The fallacy of "appeal to authority" occurs when an argument is asserted as true on the sole grounds of its endorsement by an authority figure or a perceived authority figure. Simply using an expert testimony is not a fallacy; it is good reasoning. However, such appeals become fallacious: 1) when the authority figure does not have any expertise in the area under discussion 2) when opposite opinions of other authorities are suppressed or 3) when the testimony of the authority figure is given disproportionate weight in relation to other considerations.

*Michael Jordan says "Eat Wheaties cereal so you can be like me."*

*(Michael Jordan is an excellent authority figure for advice on basketball, but a much more limited one for advice on nutrition.)*

### Slippery Slope

The "slippery slope" fallacy is an attempt to divert attention away from the question at issue by arguing that a certain decision, if made, would set in motion a series of increasingly severe consequences. These consequences are then presented as the consequences of the question at hand, rather than as the consequences of a series of future decisions that may or may not be made.

*If we start to ban extremely violent and sexually explicit speech, we will open the doors to a flood of censorship that will never stop. First, we will ban images of violent sexuality, *Penthouse* and *Playboy* will be next, then James Joyce, D.H. Lawrence, Chaucer, Byron, and Shakespeare. Before long, we will be living in a fascist state where nobody has any rights at all.*

## Fallacies that Miss the Point

### False Dilemma

The "false dilemma" fallacy presents an issue as if there were only two possible solutions. False dilemmas should be distinguished from true dilemmas. Sometimes, there really are only two choices: everything in the world is either a dog or a non-dog. But everything isn't either a dog or a cat. In most, but not all, situations, there

are middle grounds or other options that make it irresponsible to force a choice between two alternatives.

The purpose behind campus speech codes is to combat racism. Either you support our efforts to end hate speech, or you are a racist.

*(This argument ignores the fact that although you may disagree with speech codes, you support other ways to fight racism.)*

### Fallacies that Appeal to Emotions

#### Appeal to Tradition

The "appeal to tradition," or appeal to the status quo, is the assertion that an idea or course of action is "good" because it is traditional, comfortable, or the way that things have always been done. Traditional appeals, though not logical, are often very powerful because old ideas and old policies are, if not perfect, at least non-threatening.

Letting women into the Downtown Athletic Club would be a disaster; for 125 years, the club has been male-only. Why should we do anything now to break up that tradition?

#### Appeal to Fear

The "appeal to fear" is the notion that if some course of action is or is not pursued, terrible consequences will occur. The more common name for this fallacy is "scare tactics."

If we do not pass immigration reform, pretty soon we will go bankrupt because we will have spent all of our children's money on support for illegal aliens.

#### Appeal to Popularity ("bandwagoning")

The fallacy of appeal to popularity, or bandwagoning, is the claim that you should believe something or do something because everybody else believes it or does it. We tend to see a kind of emotional security in doing and thinking what other people do and think.

Don't be the last person on your block to buy a *Clippermeister* lawnmower – the only lawnmower that tells your neighbours you care about the neighbourhood as much as they do!

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This handout has been adapted, with permission, from "Logical Fallacies" by Dr. Michael Austin, Associate Professor of English, Shepherd University, Shepherdstown, West Virginia.